

### LEAST BITTERN

By E. LAURENCE PALMER

**N**OT INFREQUENTLY during the fall or spring migration of birds someone may come upon an ungainly, streaked brown bird about a foot long most of which length is taken up by the neck and head. The tail is only a couple of inches long and the wings when fully spread extend about 18 inches. Usually the bird holds its beak erect with its neck bent to form the letter S. The behavior leads one to suspect something of the snake about to

strike when the bird is in a defensive or hiding position. This smallest of our bitterns, the Least Bittern, has many of the characteristics of the American Bittern whose length is twice that of the Least Bittern. It walks like an ungainly wet hen but infinitely more cautiously. It may hold a given position for a long time during which if it is in its natural setting of reeds and rushes it may practically vanish from sight. Its hiding ability is such it may live long in an area without its presence being even suspected. During the migration season it flies at low altitudes, at



Least Bittern  
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night, with the result that not too uncommonly it crashes into some obstruction and is found in difficulties in an environment not suited to satisfy its hiding instincts.

The Corey's Least Bittern is a rare color phase of the Least Bittern and is characterized by being deep chestnut where the more typical form is light brown. There are two subspecies, the western ranging more or less generally from Oregon south through central lower California for its nesting range and on to western Guatemala for its winter range. It may winter as far north as Arizona and southern California. The eastern subspecies breeds from Maine through southern Quebec to central Minnesota and south to southern Mexico and the West Indies. It winters from Texas to eastern Guatemala and east to the West Indies.

For 17 days the 3 to 6 eggs may

be incubated by both parents in a plant platform nest among plants in a marsh or swamp. The eggs are bluish green to blue and 1 by 1/5 inches in size. The young are awkward, naked or nearly naked youngsters and there may be two annual broods in the South though there is but one in the northern part of the range. The food consists of the smaller animals of the bird's wet environment. The bird can hardly be considered of economic importance because of its small numbers and because it lives in terrain that usually yields little that man sees fit to cultivate.

When frightened, the Least Bit-

tern may fly a short distance awkwardly and apparently with effort. It may give a soft repeated "coo" while in flight. Even in flight it is sometimes possible by those who know the birds well to distinguish the males from the females and young. The back and some other spots that are dark brown in the female and young are lighter in the males.

These birds are not game birds in any sense and in a way they express the spirit of the swamps and marshes in which they live. They are protected by law and the National Wildlife Federation hopes that they may long survive in their native territory.



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